

The aesthetic of cute in Mesoamerica

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INTRODUCTION

For many, the word “cute” lacks academic rigor, but recent scholars of art have taken a serious look at cute things. Scholars like Joshua Dale (2016) and Sianne Ngai (2012) consider cute to be a valid aesthetic category for examining art pieces. However, those authors both tend to focus on contemporary US or East Asian culture. The aesthetic of cute has existed in cultures besides those ones and time frames besides the contemporary.

Aesthetic categories are, of course, artificial. They help us to create productive models, and nothing more (Bortolini 2017). In this article, I will review some art pieces from ancient Mesoamerica which can productively be described as cute.

Art historians often focus on the sublime--those great pieces that render us mute in awe before them. An example of the sublime might be Yaxchilan Lintel 24. While sharing my love of Mesoamerican art history, I've seen countless people's mouths fall in shock when I show them Lady K'abal Xook pull a thorny rope through her tongue on Yaxchilan Lintel 24, and I imagine many of the readers of this article have had similar reactions.

On the other hand, I've never seen someone's face fall in awe of a Colima dog, or the smiling Remojadas figures. I don't think that's an accident. We were not meant to view them with that same sense of awe. Even in the field of art history, we tend to elevate the sublime. But there are many aesthetics that artists, including ancient artists, can apply when making art. For example, Mesoamerican artists occasionally used the aesthetic of cute to change people's relationships with the difficult and scary aspects of life and society.

Below, I'll describe visual features associated with cute as an aesthetic principle; mention potentially cute art pieces from Veracruz, the Maya area, and Colima; and describe why artists in the area may have chosen cute.

A new field

In Western art, cute is a rare aesthetic before the mid-1900s, and many academics dismiss it as lacking gravitas. But cute has influenced Asian, especially Japanese, art for centuries. Today, in Japan, the cute mascot industry is worth \$16 billion (Francis 2019). Yet contributions to “cute studies” were sporadic until Sianne Ngai’s 2012 book and a 2016 cute-themed edition of the *East Asian Journal of Popular Culture* (Dale 2016).

The newness of the field means that the aesthetic category has been underexplored in non-Asian cultures. The only discussions of the aesthetic of cute in the art of Mexico or Central America I could find focus on the commodification of Frida Kahlo (for example, Panki and Blake 2012). Providing examples of cute objects from Mesoamerica will hopefully open the doors to more rigorous studies of this aesthetic in ancient history.

Defining the cute

Understanding an aesthetic requires two components: traits and purpose. For an overview of the traits common in cute art, it is perhaps not a surprise that I go to a Walt Disney animator, Preston Blair. “The animated cartoon character is based on the circle and rounded form” (Blair 3:1994). Blair suggests simplicity to the point of minimalism in his drawings. Intentionally cute art tends to feature animals and people that have proportions similar to young examples of the species: bigger heads in proportion to their bodies, for example (Alley 1981). To some extent, this is cultural. Culturally-specific aspects of cute, such as soft pastel color choice in art, are related to the use of these colors in settings associated with infants and childhood.

However, cute is a universal feeling probably instigated by our need to protect a community’s infants (Dale 2016). “It is in our nature to nurture.” Evolution makes us see children, and things with child-like features, as worth nurturing. But more than nurture, we must engage with them to turn them into social beings. “Cuteness is an appeal to others: an invitation to engage in social behaviors including companionship, cooperative action/play and communication through emotional reactivity.” (Dale 2016:8).

While we might assume cute characters must be things like bunnies and cats, even Hades himself can be cute. In the contemporary comic *Crow Time* by Isabelle Melançon, he appears as rounded and minimalist—aka cute.

That a god of the underworld can be cute is important to understanding the purpose of cute: Cute is disarming. It forces a renegotiation of relationships (Ngai 2012). In capitalist societies, cute allows a renegotiation with objects and personal belongings (Ngai 2012). In Mesoamerica, I argue that it allows for a renegotiation with some of the scarier and more intense social and ritual responsibilities. In the case of Colima dogs, it may allow for a renegotiation of our relationship with perhaps the most frightening part of human existence: Death.

The cute of Veracruz



Figure 1: A smiling Remojadas figurine from the Kerr collection, K3113

Ceramic figurines from Classic and Postclassic Veracruz are known for a specific, unique feature: a smile (figure 1, Beverido Duhalt 2006, Paz and Medellin 1971). The exaggerated smile first appears among the Classic era Remojadas culture of Veracruz, from about 100 to 800 CE. But even Postclassic figurines such as those from Nopiloa often smile (figure 2, for example).



Figure 2. A smiling Nopiloa figurine. Note the skill in the huipil and the object in the basket, yet also note the unrealistic body proportions and circular face. K5173.

In the case of the Nopiloa figurines, a characteristic as important as the smile is their roundness. The whole body of these figures tends to be rounded, and individual features are also rounded, so that round faces have round cheeks. Though warriors among the Nopiloa figurines do not smile, they are stylistically recognizable by their roundness (figure 3).



Figure 3: A warrior with sharpened edges reduced; with hands out, figure is almost as wide as it is tall. K3997.

This may have been utilitarian, as it is easier to fire smoother objects (Conlee personal communication). But many other ceramic depictions of people and gods in Mesoamerica are not rounded. For example, K1503 from Jaina includes sharp edges, square features, and difficult-to-fire gaps. The naturalistic faces of Postclass Veracruz such as K3114 (*figure 4*) show that local sculptors were not restricted to rounded forms and limited detail. Rather than being utilitarian, roundness and simplicity might equal cute.



Figure 4: A Remojadas image that does not smile; the figure is more ovular than rounded and is highly detailed, a trait not associated with cute. K3114.

Thomas Alley (1981) found that people associate round faces with youth, and that longer, thinner faces were less cute, and Walt Disney animator Preston Blair (1994) taught amateur animators to add facial features to simple circles for more than half a century. Roundness is quantifiable. I recently measured the first 16 search results for "Veracruz figurines" and "Jaina figurines" respectively in Justin Kerr's Pre-Columbian Gallery. I excluded non-ceramic figurines, those from Olmec Veracruz, and those whose faces couldn't be measured because of photo angle. By dividing the width from cheek to cheek by the height from forehead to chin of the figurine, I generated a ratio suggesting whether a face is circular or ovular.

The ratio of width to height of an average real human face is about 3:4, or, as a decimal, 0.75. The average Jaina face was thinner than that, at 0.70, because of Maya cranial elongation. The average Veracruz face was 0.96, and 5 pieces, all Classic era Remojadas figurines, had faces which were slightly wider than their length. Among the collection, the mean value of head shape was significantly higher than the Jaina mean; $t(30) = 5.2039(p < 0.001)$.

Richly detailed and with removable headdresses, the Veracruz figurines have an undeniable quality of artistic production that show a high level of skill and knowledge. Yet unlike the more severe Jaina-style figurines, the Veracruz figurines convey happiness, and this is not by accident.

Are Colima dogs cute?

Today, Colima dogs--vessels in the form of fattened tlalchichi dogs--are some of the best-known examples of Mesoamerican pottery and are popular subjects for replicas for the tourism market. There is a psychological reason we read them today as cute, which is fairly simple—they're round!

But there may be a less cute reason the dogs were round in real life: In addition to their role as companions, they were a potential food source. They were fattened for consumption (Espinosa Guerrero n.d.). Although frequently found looted or without context, Colima dogs were probably grave goods. They may have been substitutes for actual dogs, and they may have been as much a source of food for the deceased as guardians (Espinosa Guerrero n.d.). Tourists may view the dogs as cute today, but that doesn't mean they were meant to be viewed as cute in ancient times. This makes placing them in the aesthetic category of cute more difficult than the smiling, rounded Nopiloa pieces.

But they match other universal characteristics associated with cute besides roundness. For example, cute is often associated with youth (Alley 1981), and the Colima dogs appear to be young.



Figure 5. A youthful Colima dog. K7639.

For example, K7639 of the Kerr Gallery (figure 5) is proportionally two and a quarter heads long, with the head measured from snout to back. This does not include the tail. Today, the tlalchichi is considered extinct, but they may have been the progenitors of chihuahuas (Berón et al. 2015). An image of the dog in the Florentine Codex shows an animal that is somewhat between a chihuahua and a xoloitzcuintli dog, with a bigger body and a longer face than many chihuahuas, and the long neck common to the xoloitzcuintli.

Divided proportionally, an actual standing adult chihuahua is about three heads long, with the head measured from snout to back. This doesn't include the tail. The tlalchichi in the Florentine Codex is also about three heads long, not counting the tail. The Florentine Codex's tlalchichi has a long neck like the adult xoloitzcuintli, but Colima dogs often do not.



Figure 6. A seated Colima dog. K3100.

A sitting chihuahua is about three heads tall, from the top of the head to the bottom of the jaw. K3100, a seated Colima dog, is about two and a half heads tall. A body of those proportions matches with a puppy, not a full-grown adult. Thus, we can say one of two things: Either Colima dogs are puppies, or the potters ignored the actual proportions of their subjects. Did the potters of Colima adopt an error of proportion, or was this manipulation intentional? If there are examples of more naturalistically proportioned figurines in the Colima corpus, this would point to intentionality from the ceramicists.

One example of a Colima figurine that is not cute is K203 from the Kerr Gallery; this dancer has sharp edges and a mask with a lot of detail. His body proportions are generally correct and in line with what we'd expect an adult human to look like. Another example is K7676 (figure 7). While this figurine has the sort of sparse, minimalistic details sometimes associated with cute, the body proportions are also generally correct. This figure appears to hold a sacred "deity basket," which is something we might not expect to be cute. In fact, this object, rather than cute, has a somewhat surrealist quality to it.



Figure 7. A man with a deity basket that is likely not meant to be cute.

On the other hand, other objects in Colima culture may be cute. Baby versions of animals also appear on K3970, where jaguar kittens serve as supports for a vase. Then there are Colima dwarves, such as K3498, who lack the same sort of angularity that we find on K203. This implies cute was an aesthetic choice, not a simple accident.

The Maya and cute

There are some Mesoamerican groups that do not appear to have made much use of cute as an aesthetic, or if they did so, it looked and felt very different from contemporary cute. The Maya in general dabbled in the aesthetic rarely. Earlier, I mentioned the Jaina figurines do

not tend to have traits associated with the cute, and the lintels of Yaxchilan would best be classified as “sublime,” and certainly not cute.

In a study of childhood, I noted that the portrayal of childhood in Maya art is almost entirely within the context of the sublime (Lindsey 2020). The few children we see take part in adult rituals and let blood. Young rulers who should be children--like Pakal on the Oval Palace Stone, who was but twelve at the time--are portrayed as adults.

Cute would have been hard for the Maya, who frequently considered elongated heads beautiful (Tiesler 2012) and had a sense of horror vacui--the avoidance of open space in art (Damian 2021). This meant their works are frequently highly detailed, antithetical to at least the modern definition of cute proposed by Preston Blair.

This makes it somewhat hard to determine the “cuteness” of a figure. For example, the famous Regal Rabbit Vase, on which the rabbit rabbit companion/child of the moon goddess makes a rather profane comment to a god, could be considered cute. It has much of the set-up of cute: It is disarming and forces a reexamination of our relationship with divinity. It takes what is inaccessible and makes it quotidian. The rabbit is anthropomorphized, something Blair (1994) suggests when portraying animals in his book. He’s also rather round. But once again, the Maya use of detail means he is certainly not minimalistic or simple.

He may actually fall under a different aesthetic category described by Ngai: the zany, which is a sort of action-driven aesthetic Ngai (2012) connects with characters like Lucille Ball. Porte (2012) makes a telling comment about the zany: “labor and play are confused so that it’s hard to tell whether we ought to react to a display of zaniness with humor or concern.” Should we laugh at our rabbit friend now that he’s stolen God L’s clothes, or worry, knowing that in the next scene of the myth, God L will attempt to have the rabbit killed? While zany as an aesthetic is outside the scope of this article, the rabbit can, of course, be both cute and zany. But due to the level of detail and the heady themes on most Maya art, it’s certainly less straightforward to make claims about cuteness in Maya pieces.

There are some figures of rounded men in a crouched position such as Monuments 2 to 7 of Ucanal; Halperin and Martin (2025) suggest they may represent outsiders, probably Teotihuacanos. These figures have some of the stylistic features of cute—they’re certainly round! They also have simplified features, a trait associated with cute. If foreigners were seen as threatening, ‘cute’ versions of them may have disarmed the outsiders to some extent. In this article, I haven’t discussed the negative connotations of cute much, but many people are aware of the stereotypical and exaggerated portrayals of Black people in early 20th-century animation, for example. Many examples of racism in early 20th century animation were cute, aesthetically

speaking, but it wasn't meant to be complimentary. As Ngai (2012) mentions, cute can be demeaning. It allows us to be in charge. In that sense, these objects are cute to be demeaning to foreigners. We know Teotihuacan had a huge influence in Maya culture, but by the Terminal Classic, that influence was waning. By 'cutifying' Teotihuacanos, they were reducing the influence and power of this culture upon their own.

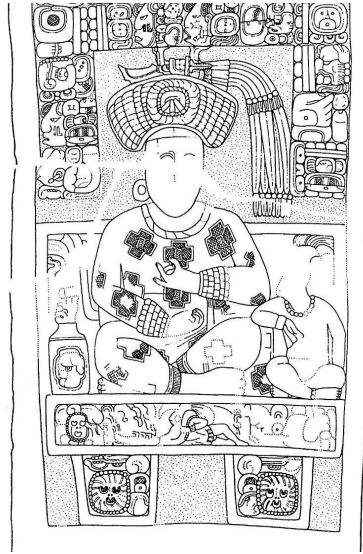


Figure 8. A close-up of Piedras Negras Stela 3, drawing by John Montgomery.

Another exception might be Stela 3 of Piedras Negras (figure 8) which portrays Lady Winikhaab Ajaw with her daughter, known at the time as Lady Ju'ntahn Ahk. Much of the imagery is not "cute" -- the proportions are generally correct on the mother, her gaze is forward on the viewer, and she has the equipment for bloodletting in her headdress. The little girl, on the other hand, is proportionally a little smaller than she should be compared to her mother's mass. More importantly is her posture--she leans on her mother's knee and looks up at her mother's face in a way that could be described as "lovingly." This posture is, as far as I know, unique in the corpus of Maya art, so its intention is difficult to ascertain. However, it is an unexpectedly tender and informal gesture in a corpus known for its formalism. In this sense, it can be considered disruptive. It calls attention to the daughter, who may have been the actual subject of the work, as I will mention below. Informal and relationship-altering, this image could be considered cute. But it is one of very few Maya pieces to use the aesthetic.

The productivity of cute: Nopiloa, Stela 3, Colima dogs

Much of Mesoamerican art is sublime. On the previously-mentioned Yaxchilan Lintel 24, Lady K'abal Xook draws a rope through her tongue while her husband watches in mute approval; this certainly fits the Merriam-Webster definition of the sublime as “lofty, grand, or exalted in thought, expression, or manner.” Many of the Jaina figurines, such as K2826 with his twisting, pained face, are also sublime.

The Veracruz figurines, too, have been described as sublime. For example, Paz (1971) describes the Veracruz smile as follows: “A smile shakes up the universe, stands outside of it, reveals its entrails. The terrifying smile is a manifestation of the divine. Like sacrifice, a smile negates work. And not only because it's an interruption of work but because it calls into question the tranquility of working.”

Interestingly, Paz nails the disruption inherent in cute objects, but he also declares the smiles to be “terrifying,” something which is certainly a personal opinion. I disagree with Paz's interpretation. Rather, something can be worthy of serious academic study without, itself, being meant to be serious. Rituals in Mesoamerica were often intense and scary. By showing happy people in ritual dance, the sculptors of Veracruz figurines were setting aside the sublime, cosmic horror of the ritual experience to say that Mesoamerica could be a warm, loving place. To use Dale's (2016:8) description of cute, figurines like these ones are “an appeal to others: an invitation to engage in social behaviors.” Investigating the figures as cute reveals another side of the Mesoamerican ritual experience.

Another piece that benefits from a cute interpretation is Piedras Negras Stela 3, with its image of a young girl in a relaxed pose. The dynasty at Piedras Negras seems to have been in trouble—the ajaw (“lord”) and his wife had failed to produce a male heir. While there is a plethora of female rulers to choose from in Maya history, most were outsiders who married into local royal families, not leaders of cities in their own right. Lady Yohl Ik'nal seems to have ruled Palenque in such a manner, though the exact details of her claim to the throne are lost. Thus emphasizing Lady Ju'ntahn Ahk's connection to the community was essential. Stela 3 “centers” Lady Ju'ntahn Ahk in a number of ways, from having the bloodletting equipment in her mother's hat “point” to her name to literally placing her birthday at the center of the inscription (Lindsey 2020). But it also may portray the young heir as cute. In this case, the goal is to instigate the protective behavior of the community—as Dale (2016) mentioned, the aesthetic of cute can be used to encourage nurturing. It may have been a way of asking the community to view Lady

Ju'ntahn Ahk as their child, a child the whole city could love. Such an appeal, if successful, would reduce the friction she would face later in life coming into power.

Finally there are the Colima dogs. Scholars often use the word “guardians” to refer to the role of the Colima dogs in the afterlife (for example, de la Garza 1999). As animals that favored nighttime, they knew the “dark paths” and could “see spirits,” and as the “inseparable companion of man,” they would happily travel to the land of the dead with us (de la Garza 1999).

As far as guardians go, a dog that was basically a big chihuahua doesn't seem like much. It hardly seems a threat for the sorts of creatures that populated the Mesoamerican underworld. But maybe “guide” is a better word than “guardian.” And a guide to a place like the land of the dead doesn't need to be stern or scary. On the contrary, a cute Colima dog may have helped people redefine their relationship with something as frightening as death. Despite being guardians, the dogs rarely seem aggressive, with one writer referring to the position taken by a Colima dog as “docile” (Espinosa Guerrero n.d.). It's unexpected body language from a guardian figure unless the guardian was also meant to put you at ease.

Colima dogs are cute. They are intentionally designed with proportions associated with young of the species, they lack details, and they have a characteristic roundness associated with the cute aesthetic in contemporary culture. Interpreting them as cute adds nuance to our understanding of the journey through the underworld. Death itself is frightening, and the voyage through the underworld is often portrayed as fraught and terrifying in its own sense. Colima dogs promise that there is a certain softness and companionship waiting for us, even in the underworld. Guardians who are cuddly can do more than fight off one's enemies: They can provide a traveler comfort on the journey through that great undiscovered country.

In *Portraits of 'The Whiteman': Linguistic Play and Cultural Symbols Among the Western Apache* (1979), Keith Basso talks about the destructive myth that indigenous people lack a sense of humor. We know that ancient Mesoamericans laughed, and told jokes, and behaved like fools from time to time, but there has been little attention paid to this side of Mesoamerican culture. While I do not believe this article is nearly definitive, I hope it opens the possibility of a deeper study of non-sublime art aesthetics in Mesoamerica.

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